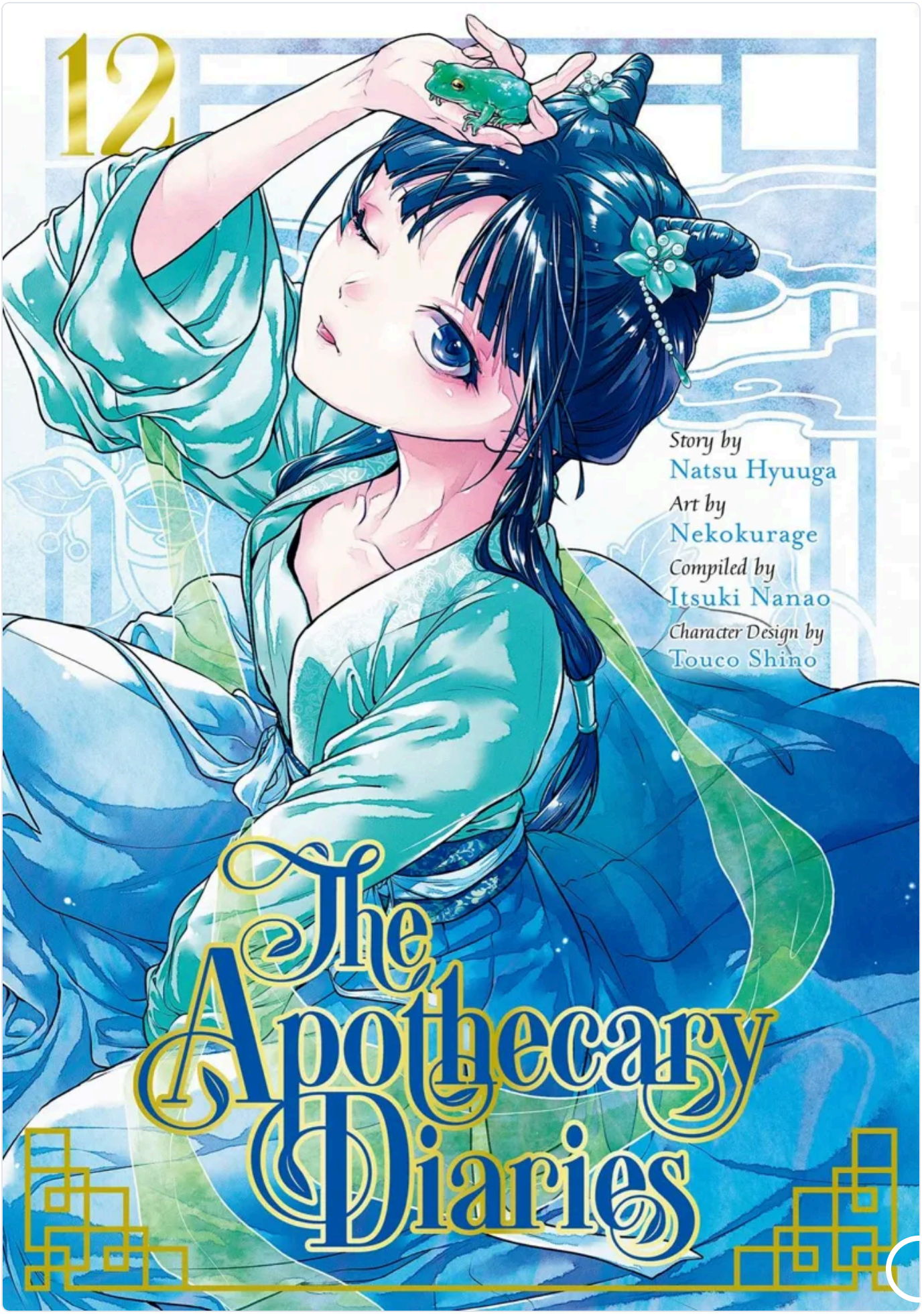
12
Story by
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Chapter 59 Ghost Stories

MAO-MAO!
BUT I WAS TOLD THESE ARE MY QUARTERS NOW...
...AND I'VE ALREADY MOVED ALL MY STUFF IN...
GO BACK TO YOUR QUARTERS LIKE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO!
...SO SINCE THERE'S NO PROBLEM WITH IT, HERE I'LL STAY, THANK YOU VERY MUCH!
LOOK, YOU'RE SETTING A BAD EXAMPLE FOR THE NEW GIRLS!
YOU CAN'T TAKE JOKES SERI-OUSLY ALL THE TIME!
ABSO-LUTELY NOT!

NEW LADIES-IN-WAITING HAVE ARRIVED.
THE THREE NEW-COMERS TO THE JADE PALACE...
...APPEAR TO BE SOMEHOW ACQUAINTED WITH YINGHUA AND THE OTHERS.
THOUGH I STILL CAN'T PUT ANY OF THEIR NAMES TO THEIR FACES...
GASP-
AAAUGH...
ゴン
THWOMP

GIGGLE
GIGGLE
AAAAH!
DO AS YOU LIKE WITH THE SHED...
...BUT I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU WOULD SLEEP IN YOUR ASSIGNED QUARTERS.
MY SUPERIORS ARE SO GENEROUS OF HEART.
HMPH!
WELL, I'M OFF TO THE SHED AGAIN!
HURRY-SCURRY

じ
STAAARE...
EVEN THOUGH THE BOSS LADIES GAVE ME PERMISSION AND I HAVE LESS TO DO NOW THAT WE HAVE NEW ATTENDANTS ...
...I SUPPOSE SHUTTING MYSELF UP IN HERE ALL DAY IS ASKING FOR TROUBLE.
YINGHUA'S A BIT OF A BUSYBODY, BUT SHE'S ONLY LOOKING OUT FOR US.
SHE PROBABLY WANTS ME TO GET TO KNOW THE NEW GIRLS ALREADY.
CARING ABOUT OUR FRIENDSHIPS AND ALLIANCES IS JUST HER WAY OF BEING CONSIDERATE.
CREEEAK
ギィ
I'M SORRY IF I'VE BEEN WRAPPED UP IN MY OWN WORLD...

?!
GRAB
I DIDN'T NOTICE ...
...OH, HAVE YOU, NOW?
...YOU'RE COMING ALONG THIS EVENING!
BUT TO MAKE IT UP TO ME...
SMIRK
I...
YOU AND I ARE THE ONLY ONES OFF TONIGHT TOO!
WHAT PERFECT TIMING!

...I'M IN TROUBLE.
WELL ...
?
...SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO SHOW YOUR FACE AT THAT KIND OF THING.
WHAT IN THE WORLD DID SHE MEAN BY THAT?

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. WE'LL BE SHIVERING BEFORE LONG.
WON'T IT BE TOO HOT TO WEAR?
HERE, PUT THIS ON.
PARTY OF TWO?
WEL-COME.
CREEEEEAK
ギィ
...WE WILL?
NOK
NOK
PUT OUT YOUR LANTERN AND FOLLOW ME, PLEASE.
SHE'S PRETTY BUT SUR-PRISINGLY OLD FOR A COURT LADY.
THAT'S RIGHT.
HELLO.

KRIK
THE BUILDING MAY BE WELL-KEPT, BUT IT SHOWS ITS AGE LIKE ALL THE BUILDINGS IN THE NORTHERN GROUNDS.
THIS BUILDING WAS USED BACK DURING THE TIME OF THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR.
KRIK
USE THIS TO LIGHT YOUR WAY INSTEAD.
THERE AREN'T NEARLY AS MANY WOMEN HERE NOW AS THERE ONCE WERE...
...SO THIS PLACE HAS FALLEN INTO DISUSE.
BUT IT'S PERFECT FOR WHAT WE HAVE PLANNED TONIGHT.
NOW, THEN...
LET'S BEGIN.

FIND AN OPEN SPOT AND TAKE A SEAT.
WELL, THIS IS A CREEPY ATMO-SPHERE.
ARE WE ALL READY?
...WE SHALL BE TELLING 13 TALES THAT WILL CHILL YOU TO THE BONE.
TONIGHT ...

BUT THERE'S ONLY...
...THIR-TEEN TALES?
—THEN, WHEN HE PEERED INTO THE WELL...
...HE SAW THE FACE OF THE LADY HE THOUGHT TO BE DEAD.
EEK!
GWEH!

TOSS
I'M GUESSING SHE WAS TOO SCARED TO COME ALONE.
SHE'S AFRAID, BUT SHE'S INTO IT.
HA HA...
TRMBL
TRMBL
FWOO!
...AND TOSS IT INTO THE BRAZIER.
...TELLING A SCARY STORY. ONCE WE'RE DONE, WE BLOW OUT OUR CANDLE...
IT SEEMS THIS IS THE KIND OF EVENT WHERE WE GO AROUND THE CIRCLE ONE BY ONE...
PERHAPS THAT'S WHY HONGNIANG GAVE US PERMIS-SION TO COME.
I DIDN'T THINK THE LADIES HERE WOULD BE INTO THIS SORT OF THING...
...BUT I SUPPOSE THE ENTER-TAINMENTS TO BE HAD HERE ARE FEW...
POKE
POKE
BUT THESE STORIES ARE ALL JUST RUMORS HEARD AROUND THE COURT.
NONE HAVE BEEN SCARY ENOUGH TO CHILL YOU TO THE BONE.

GOOD EEEVE-NING.
WANT SOME SQUID LEGS?
SHISUI.
WE'RE ON THE SEVENTH STORY NOW.
UMM, LET'S SEE...
I HEARD TELL OF THIS IN MY HOME-TOWN...
SURE.
SNAP
I'M GUESSING SHISUI DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER GETTING PERMISSION TO COME.

THERE WAS ONCE A FOREST PEOPLE WERE FORBIDDEN TO ENTER...
...BECAUSE A SOUL-EATING SPIRIT LURKED INSIDE.
IN A VILLAGE AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN, A MOTHER AND CHILD LOST THEIR MEANS OF SUPPORT.
BUT THE VILLAGE'S HARVEST HAD BEEN POOR THAT YEAR...
...SO NONE OF THE OTHER VILLAGERS WERE ABLE TO HELP THEM.
OUT OF DESPERATION, THE STARVING CHILD...
...WENT INTO THE FORBIDDEN FOREST IN SEARCH OF FOOD.
THERE WAS LOTS OF FOOD IN THE FOREST!
SO HE SAID WHEN HE CAME HOME WITH AN ARMFUL OF NUTS.
DO NOT TELL A SINGLE SOUL THAT YOU WENT THERE.
THE MOTHER WARNED HIM NOT TO TELL ANYONE...
...BUT EVENTUALLY, THE VILLAGE LEADER DISCOVERED THEIR SECRET AND CALLED THEM OUT ON IT.
HAVING BEEN FOUND OUT, THEY WERE OSTRACIZED.
AND THAT WAS WHY THE MOTHER AND CHILD HAD NO CHOICE...
...BUT TO GIVE UP ON GOING TO THE FORBIDDEN FOREST, NO MATTER HOW LITTLE FOOD THEY HAD.

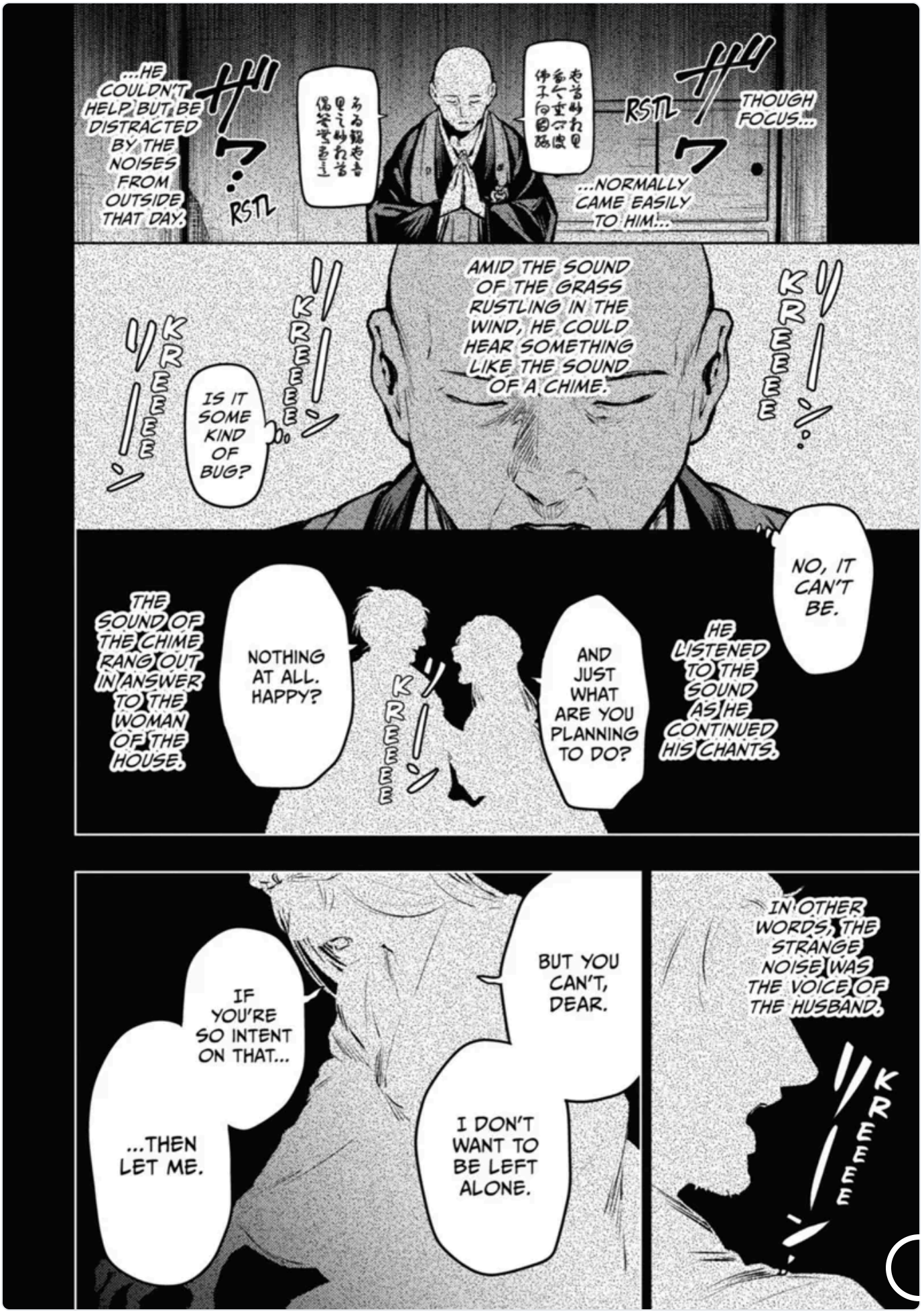
...SPOTTED A STRANGE WAVERING LIGHT DISAPPEARING INTO THE MOTHER AND CHILD'S HOME.
A VILLAGER ...
BUT THEN SOME-THING ODD HAPPENED.
BY THE TIME THEY FINALLY DARED TO APPROACH THE PAIR...
...THE CHILD HAD ALREADY BREATHED HIS LAST.
FEARFUL OF A CURSE, NONE OF THE VILLAGERS CAME TO THEIR AID.
BOTH FELL ILL THE NEXT DAY.
BUT SHE DIED BEFORE SHE COULD CONTINUE.
...I HAVE SOMETHING GOOD TO TELL YOU ALL...
THE MOTHER THEN ADDRESSED THE VILLAGERS WITH HER DYING BREATH.

EVEN NOW, IT'S SAID THAT WHEN SOMEONE DARES TO INTRUDE INTO THE FORBIDDEN FOREST...
...THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP WILL ENTER THEIR HOME...
...AND STEAL THE SOULS OF THEIR FAMILY.
FWOO!!...
THIS RUMOR HAS AT LEAST A SHRED OF TRUTH TO IT.
MUNCH
I SEE. NOT AN ENTIRELY UNUSUAL TALE.
MUNCH
HM?
IN DEATH, THE MOTHER'S FACE...
...LOOKED EERILY LIKE SHE WAS LAUGHING.

...I WONDER WHY I FEEL SO OUT OF IT THOUGH.
YAAAWN
IS IT JUST ME, OR DID YOU ENJOY THAT ONE? WHY?
I'LL TELL YOU LATER.
I SUPPOSE IT'S BECAUSE IT'S SUCH A SMALL ROOM, AND SOME OF THESE LADIES ARE BURNING INCENSE.
IT MUST BE GETTING TO MY HEAD A LITTLE.
OH.
MY TURN!
すSHP

THIS IS...
...A TALE FROM A LAND TO THE DISTANT EAST.
A DISTINGUISHED MONK WAS WALKING THROUGH A PLAIN OF PAMPAS GRASS...
...ON HIS WAY HOME FROM A NOBLEMAN'S MEMORIAL SERVICE IN A NEIGHBORING LAND.
HE HAD TO CROSS TWO MOUNTAINS TO RETURN TO HIS TEMPLE.
HE WAS COMPLETELY FINE ON THE WAY THERE...
...BUT HIS LEGS BEGAN TO FEEL LEADEN ON THE JOURNEY BACK.
HE COULDN'T EVEN REACH THE TEMPLE OF THE ACQUAINTANCE WITH WHOM HE HAD PLANNED TO STAY.
AS PART OF HIS TRAINING, THE MONK HAD NO FOLLOWERS TO ASSIST HIM NOR A STEED.
THEN, FROM FAR OFF IN THE DISTANCE, HE HEARD THE HOWLING OF WILD DOGS.
AS HE HURRIED ALONG, HE CAME ACROSS AN OLD HOUSE.

...SAID THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE, WHILE SHARING SOME EGGPLANT AND CUCUMBERS WITH HIM.
WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TO OFFER...
WHEN THE MONK TOLD THEM OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED...
IT WAS OCCUPIED BY A YOUNG COUPLE.
THE PAIR EVEN WENT AS FAR AS TO PREPARE A PRIVATE ROOM FOR HIM TO SLEEP IN.
HE ENDURED IT SINCE HE WAS THE ONE IMPOSING ON THE YOUNG COUPLE.
BUT THE HUSBAND TURNED A DISTRUSTFUL GAZE UPON THE MONK.
HE BEGAN QUIETLY RECITING THE LOTUS SUTRA TO HIMSELF, TRYING TO THINK OF WHAT HE COULD DO TO REPAY THEM.
THAT NIGHT, THE MONK WAS VERY GRATEFUL FOR THE SOFT BED.
THEY OFFERED THE MONK THIS HOSPITALITY, EVEN THOUGH HE'D BROUGHT ALONG NEXT TO NO MONEY FOR HIS TRIP...
...AND HE WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE THAN HAPPY SLEEPING IN A CORNER OF A ROOM.


...HE COULDN'T HELP BUT BE DISTRACTED BY THE NOISES FROM OUTSIDE THAT DAY.
RSTL
THOUGH FOCUS...
RSTL
...NORMALLY CAME EASILY TO HIM...
AMID THE SOUND OF THE GRASS RUSTLING IN THE WIND, HE COULD HEAR SOMETHING LIKE THE SOUND OF A CHIME.
KREEEE
KREEEE
KREEEE
KREEEE
IS IT SOME KIND OF BUG?
NO, IT CAN'T BE.
HE LISTENED TO THE SOUND AS HE CONTINUED HIS CHANTS.
AND JUST WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING TO DO?
KREEEE
NOTHING AT ALL. HAPPY?
THE SOUND OF THE CHIME RANG OUT IN ANSWER TO THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.
BUT YOU CAN'T, DEAR.
I DON'T WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE.
IF YOU'RE SO INTENT ON THAT...
...THEN LET ME.
IN OTHER WORDS, THE STRANGE NOISE WAS THE VOICE OF THE HUSBAND.
KREEEE

NO, I SHOULDN'T STOP CHANTING.
IT'S BEST TO KEEP GOING.
WHAT ARE THEY UP TO?
PERHAPS I SHOULD STEP IN AND PUT AN END TO THEIR BICKERING.
CHILL
THE MONK BEGAN TO FEEL GOOSEFLESH PRICKLE HIS SKIN.
IT'S TIME.

IT SEEMED THE WOMAN COULDN'T SEE HIM THERE.
NOW WHERE DID THAT MONK GO?
WHERE DID HE RUN OFF TO?
HOWEVER, THAT WAS WHEN THE MONK NOTICED THAT THE SHADOW OF THE WOMAN'S LEGS...
...WERE NOT THOSE OF A HUMAN.
THE MONK CONTINUED TO RECITE THE SUTRA.

KREEEEE
HONEY.
LET'S LOOK FOR HIM, HONEY. WE MUST FIND HIM. IF WE DON'T...
IF WE DON'T, I'LL HAVE TO...
THE WOMAN SOUNDED AS IF SHE WAS IN A PANIC AS SHE LEFT THE ROOM, COMPLETELY MISSING THE MONK.
KREEKREEEE
MUNCH
KREEEE
THE STRANGE NOISE CONTINUED FOR SOME TIME AFTER...
MUNCH
MUNCH
...BUT THE MONK CONTINUED CHANTING UNTIL THE NOISE HAD STOPPED.
ONCE THE NOISE CEASED...
...THE MONK LEFT THE HOUSE WITHOUT A WORD TO THE COUPLE.
THERE, OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, HE SAW THE PALE BROWN WINGS OF AN INSECT.

THE MONK BROUGHT HIS HANDS TOGETHER IN PRAYER BEFORE THE DEAD CREATURE...
...AND TRUDGED THROUGH THE PLAIN OF PAMPAS GRASS UNTIL DAWN...
...ALL THE WHILE CHANTING AS HE LISTENED TO THE SOUND OF INSECTS.
KREEEE
KREEEE
KREEEE
FWOO!
HER NORMAL CHILDLIKE DEMEANOR VANISHED AS SHE TOLD THAT TALE.
SHE WAS LIKE AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT PERSON.

HER PROFILE ...
...REMINDS ME OF SOMEONE.
TOSS
OH, RIGHT.
YOU'RE NEXT!
GRIN
THIS TALE IS FROM A FEW DECADES EARLIER.
FIDGET
FIDGET
MAYBE I'LL TELL A STORY PA TOLD ME A LONG TIME AGO.
...I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING THAT WOULD BE INTEREST-ING TO SHARE.

PHEW!
HIS LANTERN HAD BEEN MISTAKEN FOR A SPIRIT.
THEY DISCOVERED HE WAS A MAN FROM THEIR VILLAGE.
THERE WAS A RUMOR OF A SPIRIT RISING FROM THE GRAVE.
NOT BELIEVING THE TALE, SOME BRAVE LADS DECIDED TO FIND OUT WHO THIS GHOST REALLY WAS.
...THE END.
BONK
...AND HAD HEARD HE COULD BREAK IT IF HE GROUND A PERSON'S LIVER INTO PASTE AND RUBBED IT ALL OVER HIS BO—
HE WAS UNDER SOME STRANGE CURSE...
HEADBUTT!
JOLT
THE MAN WAS ACTUALLY A GRAVE ROBBER.
UHHH...
UH, I—
OH.

THIS STORY HAILS FROM THE TIME OF THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR.
THE LAST STORY. FINALLY.
THAT MAKES THIS THE TWELFTH STORY.
OH WAIT ...
WHY WAS THE LADY GOING ON ABOUT THIRTEEN STORIES THEN?
OF THE INNUMER-ABLE LADIES OF THE COURT...
...THERE WAS ONCE A WOMAN WHO BECAME THE EMPEROR'S SERVANT.

DIZZY
AWW.
NOTHING SHE'S SAYING IS REGIS-TERING.
...THAT WAS WHEN SHE FELT...
...A COLD, DAMP HAND TOUCHING HER NECK.
GASP
AND HER FINAL WORDS WERE...
WHAT THE...?

FWAP
...YOU WILL BE NEXT.
MAOMAO? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!
WHAM

PANT
PANT
I WAS RIGHT.
NO WONDER I FELT SO LIGHT-HEADED.
YING-HUA!
GET EVERYONE WHO'S FEELING UNWELL TO THE WINDOW!
HUH?
WHY? WHAT'S GOING ON?
THIS TINY ROOM IS NOW FILLED WITH HARMFUL AIR...
...BECAUSE WE KEPT ADDING THE PARTIALLY BURNED CANDLES...
...TO THE BRAZIER'S CHARCOAL!

OH!
OKAY!

PANT
PANT

I SHOULD HAVE REALIZED WHAT WAS HAPPENING MUCH SOONER.
...AHH.
I WAS SO CLOSE.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
SO WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THAT STORY?
THE STORY ABOUT THE STARVING MOTHER AND CHILD WHO WENT INTO THE FOREST!
WHO IS THAT?
MAO-MAO!
JUST SOME-ONE I KNOW.
FOR EXAM-PLE ...
...PERHAPS A VILLAGE WAS POPULATED WITH PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T NATIVE TO THE AREA...
...AND IT WAS LOCATED NEXT TO A WOOD WHERE BOTH EDIBLE AND POISONOUS THINGS GREW.
THE "FORBIDDEN FOREST" BIT IS PROBABLY SUPERSTI-TION...
...BUT I THINK THE ORIGIN FOR WHY IT BECAME FORBIDDEN IS LIKELY FACT.
OH?
PERHAPS BECAUSE THE PEOPLE HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE WOOD...
...THEY ATE SOME-THING THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE, AND IT LEFT THEM IN A SORRY STATE.
THE VILLAGE CHIEF WOULD HAVE COMMANDED EVERYONE NOT TO RECKLESSLY FORAGE IN THE WOOD.

...WHAT WAS SAFE TO EAT AND WHAT WAS POISONOUS.
...IN A TIME OF FAMINE, NO ONE KNEW HOW TO DIFFER-ENTIATE...
...BUT BECAUSE THE PEOPLE HAD OBEYED THIS RULE FOR SO LONG...
YEARS PASSED, AND THE COMMAND LED TO THE FOREST BECOMING FORBIDDEN ...
...ALL THE WHILE NOT KNOWING WHAT EXACTLY IT WAS THEY HAD BROUGHT BACK.
...THEN RETURNED HOME AS THE SUN SET...
THEY QUICKLY GATHERED FOOD...
...WHEN IT WOULD'VE BEEN HARD TO SEE AND BE SEEN.
...MOTHER AND CHILD WOULD HAVE GONE FORAGING IN THE EVENING...
BECAUSE THEY WERE BREAKING THE RULES...
AS THE NAME IMPLIES, THEY GROW IN DARK PLACES AND GLOW.
...BUT IT'S POISONOUS AND GIVES YOU THE RUNS.
IT LOOKS VERY DELICIOUS, INDEED...
THERE'S A MUSHROOM CALLED THE "MOONLIGHT MUSHROOM" THAT LOOKS JUST LIKE AN OYSTER MUSH-ROOM.

THE VILLAGERS PROBABLY THOUGHT THE LIGHT COMING FROM HER BASKET WAS A WILL-O'-THE-WISP.
THE GATHERED MUSHROOMS ILLUMINATED THE DARK, LIGHTING THE WAY...
SINCE THEY LOOK SO APPETIZING...
...I ONCE PLUCKED ONE AND ATE IT ON THE SPOT.
*OF COURSE, PA MADE ME THROW IT UP.
AS THEY WERE ALREADY MALNOURISHED...
...THE POISON WOULD'VE PROVEN LETHAL.
WHEN THEY ARRIVED HOME AND LIT A LANTERN, THE MUSHROOMS STOPPED GLOWING...
...AND THE MOTHER AND CHILD ATE THEM.
PERHAPS THAT'S WHAT THE MOTHER WAS TRYING TO SAY WITH HER DYING WORDS...
...AS A MEANS OF PETTY REVENGE AGAINST THE VILLAGERS WHO HAD REFUSED HER AND HER CHILD AID.
THERE ARE VERY DELICIOUS MUSH-ROOMS IN THE FOREST.

OOOH, SO THAT'S WHY!
BUT...
...THAT MEANS THE TRUTH'S NOT SUCH A BIG DEAL.
I BET ALL THE STORIES WE HEARD HAD PRETTY SIMILAR TRUTHS BEHIND THEM.
WELL, I'M OVER THIS WAY.
EVER THE FREE SPIRIT.
SHE'S LIKE A KID.
FLAP
FLAP
FLAP
PERHAPS.

THERE WAS AN INCIDENT.
OH MY. I HAD A FEELING SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN.
OH?
YOU'RE BOTH HOME EARLIER THAN EXPECTED.
THE LADY WHO'D BEEN RUNNING THAT TILL LAST YEAR DIED, RIGHT?
I WAS WONDERING IF THEY COULD FIND SOMEONE GOOD TO TAKE IT OVER.
I KNEW HER PRETTY WELL, YOU KNOW.
SHE WAS A SMART WOMAN. BUT...
...SHE NEVER WOUND UP BEING ABLE TO LEAVE THE INNER COURT.

I CAN'T SAY I ENJOY THOSE SORTS OF FUNCTIONS...
PAT
PAT
WHEW...
...WHICH IS WHY I JUST ASSUMED THEY WOULD STOP...
...THE YEAR AFTER SHE DIED.
BUT I'M GLAD THERE'S SOMEONE TO CONTINUE THE TRADITION.
TRMBL
TRMBL
WHSPR
JUST BETWEEN US, SHE WAS A SERVANT TO THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR.
UH, WHO WAS SHE, EXACTLY ...?

WOBBLE
TH—
THAT STORY ...
.....
OF THE INNUMERABLE LADIES OF THE COURT, THERE WAS ONCE A WOMAN WHO BECAME THE EMPEROR'S SERVANT.
...YOU WILL BE NEXT.
...AHH.
I WAS SO CLOSE.
THE WORLD IS CERTAINLY FULL OF THE INEXPLI-CABLE.
HMM...

AT ANY RATE...
...I'M GLAD I MANAGED TO PUT A STOP TO IT BEFORE WE BECAME THE THIRTEENTH STORY.
THAT NIGHT...
NNNNN...
...SO HOT.
NNNNGH!